



New on the waterfront

## Q&A/Lou Jean Fleron shares lessons from labor history

BY MARIA SCRIVANI

Sometimes geography is destiny. To hear Lou Jean Fleron, emeritus faculty member in Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR), tell it, growing up in Western Kansas—with its grain-based history and sense of community—suited her for a professional career and private life in Buffalo. Fleron arrived in Buffalo in 1970 and taught political science in UB's Millard Fillmore Adult Education Division. In 1977, she was invited to teach in the Labor Studies Program at Cornell's Extension School in Buffalo. The job included community outreach, with real-world problems and solutions constantly under consideration. For many years, Fleron chaired the city's Living Wage Commission, which ensures that municipal workers and workers employed by contractors engaged by the city are paid a decent wage, tied to cost of living. Today, Fleron is codirector (with Sam Magavern) of the Partnership for the Public Good, an organic outgrowth of Cornell ILR that functions as a research and development think tank. She also oversees the High Road Fellowships, through which students work on community-based economic development. Her life's mission has been all about fostering grassroots power through collaboration—Fleron says she is “half in the academy” through teaching, and “half totally out” through activism.

***What resonated with you about Western New York, as a newcomer? And how does teaching inform your community work—or vice versa?***

I am a third-generation educator, following my grandmother and my mother. I toyed with other occupations, but this is where I landed. I did my undergraduate work in political science and economics at Fort Hays, Kansas State, and got a master's degree in government from Indiana University. Both the geography and culture of Western Kansas influence my thinking. I was born in Hutchinson, but my dad was an oil field worker, and we moved around a bit. Every little town there had grain elevators, all run by farmers' cooperatives. So one of the things I first loved in Buffalo were those grain elevators! Both in Kansas and here, you get a sense of place, of community. In some kind of an odd way, it's what it means to be an American—some sense of the common good; the more you share, the more you have. When I first started teaching here, it was in adult public education, what I would call civics education. I would always tell my students that we were learning together, that I am a student, too. We'd trade opinions on politics and government. Breaking down the barriers between learners and teachers and figuring out new ways to foster collaboration has always been my goal.

***You have been a staunch supporter and historian of the labor movement here. Tell us about sustaining those efforts, especially in a tough***

***economy and in the face of some anti-union sentiment.***

Let's talk about what practical collaboration means, and what we've done to enhance that. In 1985, we established the Institute for Industry Studies, an education program in specific industries set up first for unions, and then for unions and employers. For a dozen years, we ran education programs for the auto industry across the country, not just here in the Buffalo area. And our WNY Employee Involvement Program met, for a number of years, on a monthly basis to help improve work performance. When Bethlehem Steel was under a court order to integrate the skilled trades apprentice program, the unions helped the company respond to that by coming to Cornell for help integrating women and minorities into the program. And it was labor/management cooperation that actually saved the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. In fact, the social sector, or what you might call the nonprofit sector, sustained this community when capital left town. I look at it from a historian's perspective; the United States has been the archetypal middle-class-rooted country. What created this middle class? It was the sense that you could create a greater good out of working for more than just yourself. Unions fought for health benefits and pensions. I fail to see how people think of unions as a special interest group. They're special, all right: what they have is the capacity to represent workers. And most people work. The only way to balance

the consolidated power of capital is through organized effort. This doesn't mean that unions are or have been perfect, but the question to ask today is, will you be able to earn a living wage as a worker in the future?

***What do you see ahead for community and country and you personally?***

I am such an optimistic person by orientation; on almost any given day, I look at what's possible, not what's disappointing. Although, I must say, I am troubled by our inability to make much progress on equality, especially racial. There is grossly unequal opportunity, and I find that un-American. There has been backsliding in recent years that I find very troubling; it affects our economy, and it affects our democracy. There is a growing awareness that we cannot just let it be; we cannot leave solutions to the traditional organizations. The real way to defend democracy is to make it work, and that falls to the local level. There is real power at the grassroots level, a practicality and decision making that is easier to engage in, easier to get more people involved. I am buoyed by the young people we see today, especially our High Road Fellows, who have a sense that they want to participate in a community that provides for everybody. One of the cool things about getting older is you've had the experience of seeing lots of twists and turns, so you know there are going to be changes and counterbalances to excess. Younger leaders bring freshness to the way they look at things, which I



Photo by kc kratt

like, and a decided acceptance of tolerance, which I like! It transcends political views; it's more open. And the arts are so important—using creativity and technology to create a better society—this is what I see that's good. And for me? There are a million things I'd like to do out there, but with eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren—most still in Buffalo, I am happy to say—I just want to try to get a little bit better balance in my life, spending more time with my husband and children. Don't know how I'm going to do that; we'll just keep trying! 🐾

Maria Scrivani writes about local history and people who make a difference. 